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SUBJECT: NEW DOMINICAN CRIME CONTROL INITIATIVES TAKE
EFFECT FOLLOWING SPIKE IN VIOLENCE

¶1. (SBU) SUMMARY: Thousands of military soldiers joined police in joint nighttime patrols throughout the country this week in an effort to quell violent crime and enforce new curfews on the sale of alcohol. These initiatives, among others, were implemented by presidential decree this week in response to growing public outcry over the rising levels of violence in Dominican society; statistics indicate the country's homicide rate has doubled since 2001. In a meeting two weeks ago with the Ambassador, President Fernandez cited violent crime along with the electricity crisis as the two most urgent issues facing the country today; education, which previously held the number two position, was barely mentioned. Fortunately rising levels of violence do not appear to be substantially affecting Americans in the country, but Americans, like others, are concerned. The issue is poised to be a contentious one in the 2008 presidential elections. END SUMMARY.

¶2. (U) To date the Dominican Republic has managed to avoid the high levels of violent crime associated with many countries in the region. In 2001, according to statistics released by the government's Office of the Public Prosecutor (Procuraduria), 1,065 homicides were committed in the country, giving it a homicide rate of 12.49 per 100,000 inhabitants. This compared favorably with other countries in the region like Jamaica and El Salvador, whose homicide rates at that time were estimated at 44 per 100,000 and 60 per 100,000 inhabitants, respectively. The perception that tourists need not worry about violent crime has been important to the country's ability to attract foreign tourists, who play a crucial role in the Dominican economy.

¶3. (U) Yet Dominican crime rates have risen precipitously since 2001, and the country no longer compares so favorably to its neighbors. Procuraduria data reveals that in 2005 2,403 homicides were committed in the Dominican Republic, giving the country a homicide rate of 26.41 per 100,000 inhabitants -- more than a two-fold increase over only 4 years. (According to FBI data, the U.S. homicide rate was 5.4 per 100,000 inhabitants in 2004.) The number of homicides so far this year is more or less consistent with 2005 levels.

¶4. (SBU) Fortunately, rising levels of crime have not substantially impacted either the official or non-official American citizen communities, but they have certainly gotten their attention. Over the past five years, homicides involving American citizen victims reported to the Embassy's American Citizen Services (ACS) section peaked at 19 in FY 2004, after which they dropped to 13 in FY 2005. We are aware of 7 such homicides thus far in FY 2006. Numbers of American citizen victims of other types of violent crime have remained relatively steady following a high of 29 reported cases in FY 2004. It is probably noteworthy (as well as

troubling) that in the past two months there have been three incidents in which American citizens have been the victims of vehicular armed robberies in the Northern Coastal area; we had not received reports of this nature on a regular basis previously.

15. (U) Over the past few months the Dominican public has increasingly taken to the streets to express outrage over the high levels of crime. Thousands of demonstrators assembled over several days in Santiago last June to demand government action following the murder of 18-year-old student Vanessa Ramirez Faa. This week hundreds more demonstrated in Santo Domingo to denounce rising crime levels and express support for government measures to combat them.

16. (U) Procuraduria statistics indicate that 563 (nearly 25%) of the killings that took place in 2005 had been carried out by members of the National Police. Although such deaths are typically classified as exchange(s) of gunfire or self-defense, this is a difficult premise to accept in most cases given that only four police) representing 0.2% of all violent deaths in 2005 -- were killed in the line of duty that year. Groups have increasingly objected to the perceived role police play in orchestrating instances of violence and crime around the country. For example, protests erupted this month in Bonao following news that two police officials convicted of murder had escaped from prison. Protestors there called upon the Chief of Police to protect them from their city,s own police force, who are widely seen as being responsible for much of the city,s crime. This week in Santiago a protest at the funeral of Luis Manuel Ventura, a 25-year-old leader in a local leftist organization, was broken up by a SWAT police team. Family and friends allege that Ventura had been dragged by police from a family funeral service and shot in full view of other mourners.

17. (U) Still other groups have mobilized to denounce corruption-related murders. The National Association of Pilots and the Dominican Association of Air Traffic Controllers have demanded that the National Police intensify its investigation into the hit-style murder of Angel Christopher Martinez, who was shot dead while in his car en route to work. Martinez, a high-ranking official in the Office of Civil Aeronautics, had been responsible for issuing permits to airplanes flying in Dominican territory. His efforts to bring permit issuances into compliance with international standards had allegedly made him many enemies. According to his family, unknown intermediaries had approached him prior to his death, offering him lucrative private sector positions to leave his job and, most recently, threatening his life.

18. (U) Violent crime has already become an important issue among likely future presidential candidates. At a speech in New York last week, Luis Toral, an aspiring Partido Reformista Social Cristiano (PRSC) party candidate in the 2008 presidential election, denounced the government,s (2005) USD \$600 million subsidies for millionaire energy companies while police officers receive salaries of only RD\$2,800 (about USD \$90) per month. He called on the government to utilize the 90,000 members of the National Army, Navy and Air Force to assist in providing security to the country. Some say that Pedro de Jesus Candelier, a former police chief and another 2008 presidential aspirant, will benefit in the upcoming elections from his law enforcement background thanks to heightened public concern over crime. He has spoken out against the government,s approach to crime control and has criticized plans to integrate military forces into regular police patrols.

19. (SBU) In a meeting two weeks ago with the Ambassador, President Fernandez cited violent crime as one of the two most urgent issues facing the country today (the other issue was the electricity crisis). During previous meetings Fernandez had indicated that education was one of the two most urgent issues in the country. This time education barely elicited mention, and then only in response to a

direct question from the DCM.

¶10. (U) With this backdrop, President Fernandez called an emergency cabinet-level meeting to discuss crime and delinquency in the country on Monday, July 24. The meeting resulted in the immediate issuance of a number of short-term decrees intended to address the growing violence in the country. These include:

- Approval of plans to incorporate military (Navy and Army) forces into evening law enforcement patrols. 3,000 soldiers began patrolling the streets alongside another 3,000 police on June 25.
- Limitations on the consumption and sale of liquor. These include outlawing the consumption of alcoholic beverages while driving and enforcement of curfews (12am on weeknights, 2am on weekends) after which the sale of alcohol in bars, clubs and corner stores will not be permitted. RSO reports that on the night the new restrictions took effect, civilian and military units were out in force ensuring that the restrictions were enforced.
- Control of motorcycles, which are a favored means of escape by criminals. License plates and helmets will be mandatory for motorcycle operators beginning in October 2006.
- Limitations on firearms. The importation of firearms and munitions will be banned. Illegally held firearms will be confiscated, and those found bearing them will be prosecuted.
- Redesign of border controls, implementation of systems for ground, air and maritime electronic surveillance. Embassy will be investigating this proposal to learn more about exactly what it will entail.
- Addition of 3,000 new police officers in Santo Domingo and another thousand in Santiago. Police officers on service in government offices will be replaced by soldiers. Policemen found guilty of delinquent acts will be prosecuted; currently most are simply transferred or released from service.
- Revision of the new Penal Procedures Code. The newest revisions passed by Congress include modifications to bail laws and police arrest practices that are intended to enhance the police's ability to fight crime. Although President Fernandez has signaled support for unspecified revisions to the Penal Procedures Code, it is unclear whether he will sign off on these specific changes.

¶11. (U) The President of the Association of Hotels, Bars and Restaurants, while noting in principle his support of government objectives, has expressed concern that the new initiatives could hurt businesses and discourage tourism; otherwise the public response has generally been supportive. Newspaper editors at each of the major newspapers have expressed their support for the decrees, many of which went into effect on June 25, but it remains unclear how the general public will respond. There is a well-established tradition throughout Dominican society of staying out late and drinking alcohol, especially on weekends, at clubs and corner-stores known locally as colmados.

¶12. (U) Civil society has also raised some concerns with the government's approach to crime. Armidis Galan, Director of International Relations at the Military Institute of Human Rights, voiced her support in principle for using military units to assist police in law enforcement responsibilities. Yet she qualified this support with the assertion that military units needed to receive proper training in order to adapt to civilian law enforcement responsibilities; they currently are not receiving such preparation. Villaverde Gomez, Program Director at the powerful Foundation for Justice and Institutionalism (FINJUS), believes that the changes to the country's Criminal Procedures Code may represent a step backwards to the days when police forces in the country acted with impunity. The Father Juan Montalvo Center for Social Studies has in the past released studies

taking issue with the government,s approach to tackling violence levels, noting that the Government should first tackle the underlying social causes like poverty, lack of medical insurance, and education.

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